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GEORGE MEREDITH THE NOVELIST

FLORENCE MARY BENNETT
Walla Walla, Washington

Thou art a masse
Of *strange delights*, where we may wish and take.
Ladies, look here; this is the *thankfull glasse*,
That mends the looker's eyes; this is the well
That washes what it shows. . . .
Thou art *Joye's handsell*: heav'n lies flat in thee
Subject to ev'ry mounter's bended knee.

What quaint charm, what novelty, honesty, oddity, there is in these lines! Their literary flavor is humorously remote from that ordinarily associated with their subject, the Holy Scriptures, and it is precisely for this whimsical, but sincere, habit of thought and expression that their author is truly great as a writer of religious poetry. He more than hints at revolt against the aesthetic fashion of his day in letters when he cries in the poem called "Jordan":

Who says that fictions onely and false hair
Become a verse? *Is there in truth no beautie?*
Is all good structure in a winding stair?

The plain wayfarer will detect good brawn and sinew, without vestige of pious flabbiness, in the man who could call "Prayer" "engine against th' Almighty," "reversèd thunder," and "a kind of tune which all things heare and fear"; and the lover of literature will rejoice abundantly in the exquisite words which name "Prayer" "the soul in paraphrase," "man well drest,"

Church-bels beyond the stars heard, the soul's bloud,
The land of spices, something understood.

This is George Herbert's poetry and it serves well as lyric prelude to George Meredith's prose. The essential similarity of genius is the more cogent because of complete dissimilarity in artistic accomplishment and in outlook on life of these individuals. On the one hand is Herbert, a seventeenth-century clergyman, heart aglow with devout flame, a man who, in spite of immense

prepossession for a courtier's life, which he had fully tasted and enjoyed, made the supreme sacrifice of self for religion's sake; and here is Meredith, a nineteenth-century person, not at all a Christian in the formally exact sense of the term. But this similarity of genius is fundamentally based, resting on ardent love of the truth. In each it is manifested by the transmutation of homely expression in this heat of sincerity, whence common and uncouth phrases become startlingly vivid.

A man so earnest to express the truth as he discerns it that he cannot take ordinary diction for granted has before him a thorny path in creative literature. Meredith bends to this imperious desire to speak the very grammar and syntax of his native tongue. But never was man philologically more exact. He harks back to the original meaning of words, to the delicate significance of moods and tenses. He even spells—not capriciously, for “there is method in his madness”—but differently from his contemporary compatriots, as when he insists on retaining the *e* always before the participial ending *-ing*. Detractors have seen in his odd style vanity or conceit. He is infinitely far from such fault.

The battle of his life was waged against sentimentality, which he believed to be the besetting sin of Englishmen in common with their Teutonic brethren of other nations. The untrue, the specious, mock sentiment, such things, and the very garb that they wear in the arts of human expression—that is, sentimentality, whether in music, painting, sculpture, poetry, or prose, or in the art of living life itself—were anathemata to him. But he is no sordid realist entranced with the mere material frame of the universe. One who knows him is generously inspirited by his genuine idealism. He is comparable to a stately tree, sky-pointing, rooted in earth.

His letters, which his younger son published after his death, are exquisitely revealing. Thence one gathers that he lived verily in the high realms of thought and spirit, never forsaken up to the very end, despite the painful physical handicaps of later years, by enthusiasm.

Nothing short of the spiritual courage of firm conviction could have carried him without lowering of the banner that he bore through the early years of struggle for a recognized place in litera-

ture. A novelist who took his novel-writing seriously was a rather astounding person in English letters of the Victorian days. From the time of Fielding it had been more or less definitely the attitude of the public to view novel-reading as a relaxation, if not as a sin. Thackeray, no less than Dickens, was regarded as one whose major calling was to amuse. And here came a man with a theory of imaginative prose as a kind of philosophy. One may well compare his purpose with that of Balzac, an anatomy of social life. Meredith practically limits himself to his own time, while Balzac sets himself the gigantic task to study the "human comedy" as manifested in French life as a whole, his own generation being conceived as an evolution from the past. Balzac's stupendous plan served in a measure to defeat his artistry. He is too pre-occupied with his setting, with the mere mechanism of formulating the whole drama as he sees it. Meredith, with smaller output and with narrower range, is the greater artist. In finesse of execution, however, he is probably surpassed by the Frenchman.

George Meredith will never be a popular novelist. No one can peruse him without an ample fund of patience, and he has scarcely a page that does not challenge one's knowledge of English and of literary allusion. But no writer is more rewarding in pure intellectual enjoyment.

He tells us frankly that he chose to study life among the rich classes, because there, where the necessity for toil is removed, he could come best at the genuine man or woman. That thought on analysis proves to be a rather terrifying one, especially to us Americans. For we are little acquainted with leisure and are therefore prone to despise its gifts. For us so long as a man is *doing something* it matters little what that *something* is. To be without practical employment and yet to be no drone—this is accomplished by few Americans. Meredith in no sense was contemptuous of the necessity for toil. He saw clearly, however, as did the Athenian, that this necessity warps life in curious fashions, and he deliberately elected to study life where frictions, and even tragedies, are not caused by Adam's curse. Yet he had a whimsical fondness for the untutored Johnny Bull, especially of the variety that loves the national sport of boxing. Oddly unreal, and yet

graphically typical, characters, like Skepsey in *One of Our Conquerors*, flit through his pages.

Many a critic has been cast adrift from his moorings when buffeted by Meredith's calm refusal to be realistic. The development of English fiction has been steadily in the direction of fidelity to actual fact in dialogue. Meredith's aesthetic theory towers like a rock in this stream. He has not the remotest wish to be "true to life." He is dedicated to the task of rendering life truthfully. He flashes forth pictures of his persons, hints at their peculiar tricks of phrasing in conversation, sets them at angles for descriptive vision on the part of other characters. In dialogue his men and women often walk as frankly on stilts as the *dramatis personae* of the Latin stage, who stalked on lofty *cothurni*. He chooses to heighten effects. A novel is not for him a stenographic report of human verbiage. Literature is art, no less than sculpture and painting. Paint and marble are never mistaken for man's flesh, nor for the accomplishment of the *camera obscura*.

The *Essay on Comedy* is perhaps the best guide to an understanding of Meredith's philosophy, for, indeed, all his imaginative work in prose belongs to the realm of high comedy, comparable to the serious comic drama. It is interesting to note that women occupy the center of his stage. Truly his prime success is in the charming portrayal of women. Here are his own words:

Comedy lifts women to a station offering them free play for their wit, as they usually show it, when they have it, on the side of sound sense. . . . The heroines of Comedy are like women of the world, not necessarily heartless from being clear-sighted: they seem so to the sentimentally reared only for the reason that they use their wits, and are not wandering vessels crying for a captain or a pilot. . . . The Comic poet dares to show us men and women coming to mutual likeness. . . . Eastward you have total silence of Comedy among a people intensely susceptible to laughter, as the *Arabian Nights* will testify. Where the veil is over women's faces, you cannot have society, without which the senses are barbarous and the Comic spirit is driven to gutters of grossness to slake its thirst. . . . There never will be civilization where Comedy is not possible; and that comes of some degree of social equality of the sexes.

He exhorts—

Cultivated women to recognise that the Comic Muse is one of their best friends. . . . Where they have no social freedom, Comedy is absent: where

they are household drudges, the form of Comedy is primitive: where they are tolerably independent, but uncultivated, exciting melodrama takes its place and a sentimental version of them. . . . Where women are on the road to an equal footing with men, in attainments and in liberty, . . . there, and only waiting to be transplanted from life to the stage, or the novel, or the poem, pure Comedy flourishes, and is, *as it would help them to be, the sweetest of diversions, the wisest of delightful companions.*

What characterization could fit more aptly than these last words Shakespeare's women of Comedy—Portia, Rosalind, Beatrice, Viola? Not less suitable is it to the women whom Meredith has drawn. An interesting and not unprofitable comparative study of novelists might be made on the basis of their power to portray characters that live vividly in the memory. The true lover of Meredith has merely to run over in mind the roll of his novels to have at each title the figure of a woman step forth, indescribably engaging and individual.

Perhaps the best remembered of all his heroines is Clara Middleton, the young lady whom the *Egoist's* kinsman, Vernon Whitford, likens to the Mountain Echo and whom Mrs. Mountstuart Jenkinson calls "a dainty rogue in porcelain." This lady, to Sir Willoughby's vexed inquiry for her meaning, has by way of final reply to his question, "You like her?" this: "In love with her! I can imagine life-long amusement in her company. Attend to my advice: prize the porcelain and play with the rogue." Advice which Sir Willoughby is incapable of following, for he could prize nothing but himself and is unacquainted with play. And so the rogue be-rogues him. It is the keynote of the novel. Yet how honest and honorable and wholesome she is, how bewitching! But the entire portrait gallery is so charming that one would be sadly bewildered to choose his favorite after all. Here are the sweet flower Lucy, whom *Richard Feverel* loved and wedded and lost; French Renée and English Cecilia; also the dubious Rosamund, of *Beauchamp's Career*; Carinthia Jane of *The Amazing Marriage*; Lord Ormont's Aminta; Janet Ilchester and the Princess Ottilia of *Harry Richmond*; Nataly and her daughter NESTA of *One of Our Conquerors*; the incredible English-Portuguese Countess de Saldar, *Evan Harrington's* sister; black-browed Rhoda Fleming and her fair sister Dahlia; *Emilia-Vittoria*, the patriot-singer;

and wayward, inexplicable *Diana*. There are many who love Diana best of all, in spite of her crossways which they are free to "give up" as an enigma.

There is no mire in Meredith's novels. He is not one of the grovelers. He says again of the Comic Spirit:

If you believe our civilisation is founded on common sense (and it is the first condition of sanity to believe it), you will, when contemplating man, discern a Spirit overhead; not more heavenly than the light flashed upward from glassy surfaces, but luminous and watchful; never shooting beyond them, nor lagging in the rear; so closely attached to them that it may be taken for a slavish reflex until its features are studied. . . . Men's future upon earth does not attract it; *their honesty and shapeliness in the present does*; and whenever they wax out of proportion, over-blown, affected, pretentious, bombastical, pedantic, fantastically delicate; whenever they offend sound reason, fair justice; are false in humility or mined with conceit, individually, or in the bulk—the Spirit overhead will look *humanely malign* and cast an oblique light on them, followed by volleys of silvery laughter. This is the Comic Spirit.

This essay in its first form, a series of lectures given at the London Institution, belongs to the year 1877, midway, so to speak, in his career as novelist. It must sum up the ideal which he had set himself, the inner secret or spring of his workmanship, in the noble list of books preceding that date: *The Ordeal of Richard Feverel*, *Evan Harrington*, *Sandra Belloni*, *Rhoda Fleming*, *Vittoria*, *The Adventures of Harry Richmond*, *Beauchamp's Career*; and presumably it may also be taken as the compass—more specifically regulated, because in the essay his theories had crystallized—by which he charted the course for *The Egoist*, *Diana of the Crossways*, *One of Our Conquerors*, *Lord Ormont and His Aminta*, *The Amazing Marriage*. (*The Tragic Comedians*, which belongs to this period is scarcely to be considered a novel.)

Indeed, *The Egoist*, the most "humanely malign" of all his works—this of Meredith's is a great phrase!—opens with a little essay on Comedy, the device of such a preface to a novel being reminiscent of Richardson's method. In this to a terse and whimsical re-enunciation of his conception of the Comic Spirit he adds some theories on art in literature that would prove astoundingly interesting if used as a touchstone for the great bulk of English writing since his day. He holds that—

The realistic method of a conscientious transcription of all the visible, and a repetition of all the audible, is mainly accountable for our present branfulness, and for that prolongation of the vasty and the noisy, out of which, as from an undrained fen, streams the malady of sameness, our modern malady. . . . We drove in a body to Science the other day for an antidote. . . . And before day-break our disease was hanging on to us again. . . . We were the same, and animals into the bargain. This is all we got from Science. Art is the specific. The chief consideration for us is, what particular practice of Art in letters is the best for the perusal of the Book of our common wisdom [i.e., the "Book of Egoism"], so that with clearer minds and livelier manners we may escape, as it were, into daylight and song from a land of fog-horns. Shall we read by the watchmaker's eye in luminous rings *eruptive of the infinitesimal* [what a characterization of modern *realism*!], or pointed with examples and types under the broad Alpine scenery of the spirit born of our united social intelligence, which is the Comic Spirit? If Comedy watches over sentimentalism with a birch-rod, she is not opposed to romance. . . . In Comedy is the singular scene of charity issuing of disdain under the stroke of honourable laughter: an Ariel released by Prospero's wand. . . . And this laughter of reason refreshed is floriferous, like the magical great gale of the shifty Spring deciding for Summer.

It is small wonder that a book thus preluded—and interluded, one might add—built on the social and aesthetic philosophy definitely evolved in the *Essay on Comedy*, should be the most abstract and, to many, the most thorny of Meredith's novels. Truly in his zeal for men's *honesty and shapeliness in the present* he wields the birch rod swishingly against the *overblown* and all those other evils of his category of sentimentalities, the things *out of proportion*, and the silvery laughter rises to the skies. For ten who inveigh against the difficult unreality of the book, there will be one to whom it wafts abundantly, to his huge enjoyment, that *magical great gale, floriferous*. In this and the four other novels of the group one discerns peculiar assurance in the author's style, betokening his realization, not exactly of success already gained—for in a sense he never was a *successful* writer—but of the right to be heard which he had won for himself. Whence he becomes, one may say, jealously true to his inner self, in diction and thought. It is the real Meredith, the mature giant, of the pen sharpened by long practice, untrammelled, uncramped, whom we behold in these books. He was but sixty-seven when the last of them was written, and that is an age of ample vigor for a man who began to write

with a master's touch when he was twenty-eight. He lived to be eighty-one, his last years occupied with his beloved work of poetry, his favorite medium for expression, small although his output therein was when compared with his prose.

The Egoist offers an interesting parallel in main theme, as well as, partially, in manner of treatment, to the very first of Meredith's prose writings, *The Shaving of Shagpat*, which is not a novel at all, but an allegorical satire, cast in the mold of an *Arabian Nights* entertainment. The Egoist's poll of conceit has been pretty well trimmed when the curtain falls in the last chapter. In *Farina* also, the second book published, which follows the style of the German medieval romances, the close reader may descry a lesson lurking, but after all it is frankly a tale. One can fancy that Meredith, educated apart from the stock English schooling, was casting about for the form of expression that suited him. Certainly the didactic tone of the moralist never forsook him. It draws him for classification toward the group of satirists, whose work has been peculiarly vigorous and racy in English letters, as the eighteenth century amply testifies. Undeniably there is kinship between *Shagpat* and *Gulliver*. Likewise there is affiliation to the allegorists of our language, early and late, to the author of *Piers Plowman* and to the author of *Pilgrim's Progress*. In truth, this may be the chief problem of criticism regarding Meredith, to assign his writings to category! He is extra-canonical, wherefore there are many to throw stones, while a few undauntedly approve with admiration, as was the case with Browning.

He "found himself" as a novelist in *Richard Feverel*. In this there is glow of the Celtic romanticism and lyricism that were in him, howbeit he sturdily takes the field against the *fantastically delicate*. Probably it is the best known of his novels, having created a stir in its day as an "immoral book." The next, *Evan Harrington*, is the best fun-maker of them all. The battle, waged under the leadership of the incomparable Countess de Saldar, to save Evan from tailordom, with the mother, the majestic and formidable Mrs. Mel, the tailor's widow, as marshal of the forces of opposition, is a brilliant piece of genuine comedy. *Sandra Belloni*, its sequel, *Vittoria*, and *Harry Richmond* bear adequate

witness to the statement that Comedy is *not opposed to romance*. The last, with its portraits of the self-deluded posturer who believes himself to be of royal lineage; of the irascible old Squire, generous and tight-fisted at the same time; of the young hero, wanderer among gypsies, the beloved of the Princess Ottilia, his erratic father's champion; of sweet-hearted, honest Janet Ilchester, is a rich tale. One who would know Meredith should begin with this, then take *Sandra* and *Vittoria*, skeptical although the author was of his wisdom in painting the picture of the Italian war for independence. *Beauchamp's Career*—Meredith's favorite—is a fine study of an idealist, rather overladen with the political arguments and theorizings of some of the characters. *Rhoda Fleming* has perhaps reaped the largest meed of praise which the critics are disposed to bestow on the writer, and yet I am inclined to believe that a sincere Meredith-lover will infallibly find it hard and unnatural in execution. There are traces of the forced pen.

This first group of novels—of course, it is entirely *meo arbitrio* that the *Essay* is the dividing line—furnished the stuff whence the *Essay* grew. For that gathered together the experience and theories of long practice. The novels that follow, as I have hinted, are more self-consciously plotted and executed. It would be an error to draw too sharp a division between the groups. The later manner is essentially not different from the earlier; quotations from early and from late will serve vitally to illustrate our famous *Essay*.

It can scarcely be fortuitous that in the final five the master's mind grapples step by step with the problem of woman socially rebellious. We are shown successively in the series the jilt; the woman of clouded reputation; the unwedded wife; the wife unacknowledged who finds another mate; the wife cast aside and late wooed in vain by her husband. This bald itemizing of situations is distressingly void of charm, belying Meredith's grand artistic achievement in painting in each instance a lovely and lovable woman. With peculiar delicacy and sympathy he is studying the true-hearted woman in shadow. In the adjective is the gist of the whole matter. He shows that to be errant, even widely, does not pollute the springs of character, if the heart be

pure. It is idle to say that herein is dangerous doctrine, for the author is not a doctrinaire. Murderers are not bred by reading *Macbeth*. Certainly George Meredith does not equivocate about the iciness of the social shadow in which women sometimes place themselves, nor about the keen sufferings of the feminine heart in that chill region. Really it is misleading to say that he is studying woman. Whatever his preoccupation with the abstract and with types, he does not fail to create genuine characters. Listen to his final fling at the English public, the conclusion to his last novel. The story's events are

as consequent to your understanding as a piece of logic, though an exposure of character! Character must ever be a mystery, only to be explained in some degree by conduct; and that is very dependent upon accident. . . . It is an infant we address, and the storyteller whose art excites an infant to serious attentions succeeds best; with English people assuredly, I rejoice to think, though I pray their patience here while that philosophy and exposure of character block the course along a road inviting traffic of the most animated kind.

He would have quarreled with Aristotle too, who thought the story more important than character and style!

Truly he is rather wicked in this parting jeer at his fellow-countrymen, but he had suffered long of exasperation of the spirit. It is rather odd that he was "discovered" and enjoyed in the United States quite early in his career. Beside this fact—not at all as effect!—may be set his admiration, openly expressed in the *Letters* for the magnanimity displayed by the American people in their speedy healing of the breach made by the Civil War. He writes at the time that for this reason he conceives this country to be the "hope of civilisation." Yes, but if he had been born one of us, it would have been his mission to scourge us with that birch rod of Comedy! It is *honorable laughter* that his stroke elicits. Indeed, he is himself Ariel, with a touch of Robin Goodfellow—Celt and Saxon, mirthfully disporting himself as Celt among the Saxons and Saxon among the Celts. Menander and Terence, Shakespeare in merry vain and Ben Jonson, Cervantes and Molière, these should be his beloved masters and companions of the craft wherein his spirit wrought.